Mad in America
SCIENCE, PSYCHIATRY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

In 2018, still in the throes of painful withdrawal from a psychiatric drug cocktail, U.S. Air Force veteran Derek Blumke began connecting the dots. His independent research into psychiatric drug harm and pharmaceutical industry corruption would eventually lead him to Mad in America, where he launched the Veterans' & Military Families Initiative in 2019. Later that same year he co-authored with Robert Whitaker a blockbuster report, "Screening + Drug Treatment = Increase in Veteran Suicides."

As Blumke addressed large veteran audiences, sharing his own story and highlights from the research, he discovered that he was far from alone in his experiences. He heard horror story after horror story that followed a disturbingly familiar pattern: starting, adjusting the dose, or abruptly stopping antidepressants was followed by personality changes, outbursts and acts of violence or suicide, leaving countless families and lives destroyed. For Blumke, a personal search for answers turned into an enduring advocacy mission.

Derek Blumke

At the 2023 Military Influencer conference in Las Vegas, whenever he spoke about his work, everyone kept saying "You have to talk to Will Wisner," executive director of the Grunt Style Foundation, a nonprofit veteran organization dedicated to ensuring the mental health and wellness of military veterans. Amid the din of the hotel casino, the two men connected and discovered that they shared the same mission: ending the epidemic of prescribed veteran suicides.

Wisner introduced Blumke to Timothy Jensen, the Grunt Style Foundation's Board President and co-owner of the most popular military apparel brand in the country, GruntStyle. Jensen, an Iraq war veteran who served in the Marines, had been researching psychiatric drug overprescribing in the Veterans' Health Administration (VA) system for years. He had his own harrowing personal story of antidepressant harm, and he had lost his best friend, a fellow veteran, to suicide soon after he was prescribed Wellbutrin for smoking cessation.

In 2022, Jensen teamed up with Wisner, the advocacy organization BurnPits360, the Veterans of Foreign Wars, comedian Jon Stewart and others to fight for care and benefits for veterans who were exposed to burn pits, radiation, chemical weapons and other toxins during their service. After a years-long fight led by a long list of advocates and veteran nonprofits, Jensen, Wisner, BurnPits360 and a cadre of others camped out on the steps of the U.S. Capitol for six days in the heat and rain to get help for their sick friends. The Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics (PACT) Act was signed into law in August of 2022, and it now provides care and benefits to nearly a million U.S. military veterans. These experiences drove Jensen and his team to look deeper at other issues impacting the veteran community.

Tim Jensen

"I just like a good fight," Jensen told Mad in America. "I'm an underdogger. And in this fight that we're currently talking about here, we're the underdog. We keep getting served some poison that's taking our community in droves, and I'm tired of seeing it."

Soon after their first meeting, Jensen and Wisner hired Blumke on as the Foundation's first Veterans' Impact Fellow, giving him the support and imbedding him into a fast moving team to tackle the veteran

suicide epidemic. The product of the Grunt Style Foundation's efforts is the launch of the War Cry For Change, a campaign to transform veteran mental health, to ensure prescribing practices at the VA for veterans are safe, and prevent the harm from current prescribing practices across the country.

A veteran-led movement for informed consent

Poring through the data, Blumke landed on some startling statistics: 68% of all veterans seen at least one time for care at the VA in 2019 had been prescribed psychotropic drugs, and 28% were issued prescriptions for antidepressants.

"It should be zero shock that veterans have the suicide rates we do," Blumke said. "Veteran suicide rates are two to two and a half times that of the civilian population. Prescription rates of antidepressants and psychiatric drugs are of the same multiples, which are both the highest in the world."

The Foundation's Executive Director Will Wisner also rejects the prevailing explanation that mental illness and trauma are the sole causes of the veteran suicide epidemic. "Trauma and mental health struggles are very real things," he said. "But at the end of the day, we know that the overprescribing, polypharmacy, the lack of informed consent — people not being told the risks of the medications they are being put on that can cause violence and suicides, all kinds of horrific stuff — is what we believe is causing 25 percent or more of all veteran suicide deaths."

The Grunt Style Foundation has taken a strategic and tactical approach in developing the campaign's aims. "We are looking at this fight and we're really observing the battle space," Jensen said. "The people I surround myself with and my team, we're tacticians, we're fighters. We don't walk into a fight that we know we're not going to win."

To that end, the campaign has four relatively simple aims: First, to ensure veterans and their families understand the risks of the medications they are prescribed by adding a signatory informed consent requirement, similar to what is required for long term opioid prescribing, for all psychotropic medications and drugs with box warnings prescribed at the VA. "If you need help, the first approach should not be a doctor prescribing you a drug without a real discussion about talk therapy and other modalities," Blumke said. "And it certainly shouldn't be prescribing a drug and not telling the patient about the real risks of suicide, violence, permanent sexual dysfunction, long-term dependency, akathisia and others, all things the drug companies and the FDA have known about for a long time."

The campaign also seeks retraining of all VA prescribers and mental health clinicians on efficacy and risk profiles of medications with FDA box warnings. "They need to know that some of what they learned in medical school and their graduate programs isn't the full story. Antidepressants and other psychotropic drugs have huge risk profiles, but doctors and counselors aren't even being trained about these issues, especially the issue of dependency and the painful withdrawal that can accompany them," Blumke noted. "Many people feel benefited by these medications, so we are not at all looking to end the prescribing of them, but rather when we are prescribing antidepressants and other psychotropic drugs, patients are informed and that we are doing it safely. Today we are not."

The third goal is to reform VA de-prescribing guidelines for all psychotropic drugs with FDA box

warnings. Current guidelines instruct prescribers to titrate patients off of these medications very quickly, usually in a matter of weeks. “Two to four weeks is not enough time for many people who have been on an antidepressant, benzodiazepine, or antipsychotic drug for five years,” said Blumke. “It’s not enough. Patients need to be told about how to get off these drugs safely and they need help doing it.”

Finally, the campaign seeks to work with the VA to share their rates of psychotropic medication prescriptions, and post-mortem toxicology report data for veterans treated by the VHA who died by suicide or indeterminate causes, starting in the early 2000s when psychiatric drug prescription rates at the VA began to soar.

Tim Jensen and Derek Blumke

“We’ve been working with VA leadership and through my role with the Michigan Governor’s Challenge we’ve been having talks with their heads of mental health. These conversations have been very productive, because our asks are sensible,” Blumke explained. “The average person hearing them says, ‘Oh, more education for patients about the medications they’re prescribed and not just a six foot print off of information in small font. This sounds great!’”

A major component of War Cry for Change is the veteran storytelling campaign, where Mad in America and the Grunt Style Foundation have teamed up in partnership to enable veterans and military families to share their stories of harm.

The VA as a starting point

For Blumke and Jensen, the VA is merely a starting point towards addressing these issues at a wider level. “We can’t fix this issue just by fixing the VA,” Blumke noted.

The campaign also seeks to get the attention of Congress in the near future. “We’re walking in and we’re carrying a big stick, and we’re gonna thump all the bad actors in a way that has not been done

before," said Jensen. "All the charades that have been put on before in front of Congress — we're going to sink that ship."

Jensen was hopeful about plans to hold public hearings on pharmaceuticals and Big Pharma with "testimonies from real Americans, not the contrived individuals that you've seen ponied in front of the Senate in previous instances."

"Our goal is to fix this issue and to end this endless path of death and misery and suffering," Blumke added. "Pharmaceutical influence over government has allowed this to go on as long as it has. And I think there are many families in this country who are fed up and feel they deserve better."

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Editor's note: On Monday, June 17, Mad in America will publish the first in a series of personal stories by veterans and their families that the Gruntstyle Foundation is gathering to support its initiative.

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Leah Harris is a writer and educator with bylines in *The Huffington Post*, Rooted in Rights, the Disability Visibility Project, Mad in America, the *Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel*, and the *Philadelphia Inquirer*.